

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 6553

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TAGS: PINT ELAB TS

SUBJECT: LABOR DISPUTE CLOSES TWO TUNIS DAILIES

SUMMARY: ONLY TWO SEMI-INDEPENDENT DAILY NEWSPAPERS IN TUNISIA, AS-SABAH AND LE TEMPS, CEASED PUBLICATION SEPTEMBER 18 IN MANAGEMENT LOCK-OUT OF WORKERS IN LABOR DISPUTE. THIS CLOSING DENIES TUNISIAN S LARGEST CIRCULATION DAILY AND THEIR ONLY TASTE OF FREE PRESS. MAJOR POLITICAL FIGURES HAVE BEGUN CHOOSING UP SIDES IN DISPUTE THAT COULD ASSUME LARGER PROPORTIONS. END SUMMARY.

2. ON SEPTEMBER 18, AS-SABAH AND LE TEMPS ANNOUNCED THAT THEY HAD DECIDED TO CEASE PUBLICATION AS A RESULT OF "TRICKERY AND PRE-MEDITATED DELAYS" OF WORKERS INCITED BY OUTSIDE AGITATORS. AS-SABAH, ARABIC LANGAUGE DAILY WITH 40,000 CIRCULATION, AND LE TEMPS, FRANCH LANGAUGE DAILY WITH 13,000 CIRCULATION, BOTH PUBLISHED BY HABIB CHEIKHROUHO, A PROMINENT BUSINESSMAN WITH MANY FRIENDS IN GOT. LONG PLAGUED BY LABOR TROUBLE, HE APPARENTLY DECIDED LOCK-OUT WAS BEST TACTIC. AS-SABAH IS LARGEST CIRCULATION DAILY WHILE LE TEMPS IS ONLY NEWSPAPER THAT VENTURED TO PUBLISH REPORTS ON LOCAL SCENE AT VARIANCE WITH OFFICIAL GOT LINE. ABOUT 250 EMPLOYEES ARE DAR AS-SABAH AFFECTED BY LOCK-OUT.

2. ACCORDING TO OUR INFORMATION, IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF LOCK-OUT WAS SLOW-DOWN STRIKE BY WORKERS NEAR MID-NIGHT SEPTEMBER 17 WHILE MORNING PAPERS ON PRESS TO PROTEST FIRING OF FELLOW WORKER. CHEIKHROUHO PERSONALLY TOOK DECISION FOR LOCK-OUT AFTER HE HAD CONSULTED PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA AND GOTTEN HIS ENCOURAGEMENT.
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MENT. WE UNDERSTAND CHEIKHROUHO TOOK DECISION AS TEMPORARY MEAS-

SURE WITH INTENTION OF REPLACING ENTIRE STAFF. AS-SABAH WAS HIGHLY PROFITABLE AND HE WILL UNDOUBTEDLY REPUBLISH IT SOON. LE TEMPS WAS MONEY LOSER AND TUNISIANS SPECULATED IT MAY NOT REAPPEAR.

3. TRADE UNION MOVEMENT REACTED VIGOROUSLY TO CHEIKHROUHOU ACTION. UGTT PUBLISHED COMMUNIQUE ON SEPTEMBER 19 THAT NOTED FAILURE OF DAR AS-SABAH TO OBSERVE LEGAL MINIMUM STANDARDS IN WORK CONTRACT AND CLAIMED THAT IT HAD ULTERIOR MOTIVES IN DECLARING LOCK-OUT. UGTT ALSO NOTED THAT LOCK-OUT WAS ILLEGAL AND PROMISED THAT IT WOULD CONTINUE TO DEFEND INTERESTS OF DAR AS-SABAH WORKERS.

4. DAR AS-SABAH LOCK-OUT ASSUMES WIDER IMPORTANCE SINCE IT CLOSES DOWN ONLY TWO SEMI-INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS IN TUNISIA. PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA HAS REPORTEDLY BEEN INFURIATED AT LE TEMPS' ICONOCLASM AND HAS ENCOURAGED CHEIKHROUHOU TO CEASE ITS PUBLICATION OR CHANGE ITS EDITORIAL STAFF. ISSUE ALSO INVOLVES ANTOEHR DISPUTE WITHIN TUNISIAN POWER STRUCTURE SINCE CHEIKHROUHOU AND UGTT LEADER HABIB ACHOUR HAVE LONG FEUDED. CHEIKHROUHOU HAS REPUTATION AROUND TOWN AS UNRECONSTRUCTED LAISSEZ-FAIRE CAPITALIST WHO EXPLOITS HIS WORKERS AND UGTT HAS REGULARLY COME TO ASSISTANCE OF DAR AS-SABAH UNION IN VARIOUS DISPUTES.

5. RADIO TUNIS REPORTED LATE SEPTEMBER 20 THAT BOTH PAPERS WOULD BE BACK ON NEWSTANDS SEPTEMBER 22. GOT MAY HAVE SUCCEEDED IN PAPERING OVER DIFFERENCES BUT LOCK-OUT IS UNPRECEDENTED MOVE IN TUNISIA AND WILL LEAVE BAD TASTE IN MOUTHS OF WORKERS AND COULD WELL CONTRIBUTE TO POISONING OF SOCIAL CLIMATE.
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